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# The Colossus

& OTHER POEMS

SYLVIA PLATH

## Sylvia Plath

### *The Colossus & Other Poems*

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts. She began publishing poems and stories as a teenager and by the time she entered Smith College had won several poetry prizes. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Cambridge, England, and married British poet Ted Hughes in London in 1956. The young couple moved to the States, where Plath became an instructor at Smith College. Later, they moved back to England, where Plath continued writing poetry and wrote her novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was first published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in England in 1963. On February 11, 1963, Plath committed suicide. Her *Collected Poems*, published posthumously in 1981, won the Pulitzer Prize.



# The Colossus

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& Other Poems

by Sylvia Plath

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*For Ted*

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## The Manor Garden

---

The fountains are dry and the roses over.  
Incense of death. Your day approaches.  
The pears fatten like little buddhas.  
A blue mist is dragging the lake.

You move through the era of fishes,  
The smug centuries of the pig—  
Head, toe and finger  
Come clear of the shadow. History

Nourishes these broken flutings,  
These crowns of acanthus,  
And the crow settles her garments.  
You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,

Two suicides, the family wolves,  
Hours of blankness. Some hard stars  
Already yellow the heavens.  
The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms  
Quit their usual habitations.  
The small birds converge, converge  
With their gifts to a difficult burning.

## Two Views of a Cadaver Room

---

1

The day she visited the dissecting room  
They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,  
Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume  
Of the death vats clung to them;  
The white-smocked boys started working.  
The head of his cadaver had caved in,  
And she could scarcely make out anything  
In that rubble of skull plates and old leather.  
A sallow piece of string held it together.

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.  
He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

2

In Brueghel's panorama of smoke and slaughter  
Two people only are blind to the carrion army:  
He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin  
Skirts, sings in the direction  
Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,  
Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,  
Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands  
Of the death's-head shadowing their song.  
These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long.

Yet desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country

Foolish, delicate, in the lower right-hand corner.

## Night Shift

---

It was not a heart, beating,  
That muted boom, that clangor  
Far off, not blood in the ears  
Drumming up any fever

To impose on the evening.  
The noise came from the outside:  
A metal detonating  
Native, evidently, to

These stilled suburbs: nobody  
Startled at it, though the sound  
Shook the ground with its pounding.  
It took root at my coming

Till the thudding source, exposed,  
Confounded inept guesswork:  
Framed in windows of Main Street's  
Silver factory, immense

Hammers hoisted, wheels turning,  
Stalled, let fall their vertical  
Tonnage of metal and wood;  
Stunned the marrow. Men in white

Undershirts circled, tending

Without stop those greased machines,  
Tending, without stop, the blunt  
Indefatigable fact.

## Sow

---

God knows how our neighbor managed to breed  
His great sow:  
Whatever his shrewd secret, he kept it hid

In the same way  
He kept the sow—impounded from public stare,  
Prize ribbon and pig show.

But one dusk our questions commended us to a tour  
Through his lantern-lit  
Maze of barns to the lintel of the sunk sty door

To gape at it:  
This was no rose-and-larkspurred china suckling  
With a penny slot

For thrifty children, nor dolt pig ripe for heckling,  
About to be  
Glorified for prime flesh and golden crackling

In a parsley halo;  
Nor even one of the common barnyard sows,  
Mire-smirched, blowzy,

Maunching thistle and knotweed on her snout-cruise—  
Bloat tun of milk

On the move, hedged by a litter of feat-foot ninnies

Shrilling her hulk

To halt for a swig at the pink teats. No. This vast  
Brobdingnag bulk

Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,  
Fat-ruttred eyes

Dream-filmed. What a vision of ancient hoghood must

Thus wholly engross

The great grandam!—our marvel blazoned a knight,  
Helmed, in cuirass,

Unhorsed and shredded in the grove of combat

By a grisly-bristled

Boar, fabulous enough to straddle that sow's heat.

But our farmer whistled,

Then, with a jocular fist thwacked the barrel nape,  
And the green-copse-castled

Pig hove, letting legend like dried mud drop,

Slowly, grunt

On grunt, up in the flickering light to shape

A monument

Prodigious in gluttonies as that hog whose want  
Made lean Lent

Of kitchen slops and, stomaching no constraint,

Proceeded to swill

The seven troughed seas and every earthquaking continent.

## The Eye-mote

---

Blameless as daylight I stood looking  
At a field of horses, necks bent, manes blown,  
Tails streaming against the green  
Backdrop of sycamores. Sun was striking  
White chapel pinnacles over the roofs,  
Holding the horses, the clouds, the leaves

Steadily rooted though they were all flowing  
Away to the left like reeds in a sea  
When the splinter flew in and stuck my eye,  
Needling it dark. Then I was seeing  
A melding of shapes in a hot rain:  
Horses warped on the altering green,

Outlandish as double-humped camels or unicorns,  
Grazing at the margins of a bad monochrome,  
Beasts of oasis, a better time.  
Abrading my lid, the small grain burns:  
Red cinder around which I myself,  
Horses, planets and spires revolve.

Neither tears nor the easing flush  
Of eyebaths can unseat the speck:  
It sticks, and it has stuck a week.  
I wear the present itch for flesh,  
Blind to what will be and what was.



I dream that I am Oedipus.

What I want back is what I was  
Before the bed, before the knife,  
Before the brooch-pin and the salve  
Fixed me in this parenthesis;  
Horses fluent in the wind,  
A place, a time gone out of mind.

## Hardcastle Crag

---

Flintlike, her feet struck  
Such a racket of echoes from the steely street,  
Tacking in moon-blued crooks from the black  
Stone-built town, that she heard the quick air ignite  
Its tinder and shake

A firework of echoes from wall  
To wall of the dark, dwarfed cottages.  
But the echoes died at her back as the walls  
Gave way to fields and the incessant seethe of grasses  
Riding in the full

Of the moon, manes to the wind,  
Tireless, tied, as a moon-bound sea  
Moves on its root. Though a mist-wraith wound  
Up from the fissured valley and hung shoulder-high  
Ahead, it fattened

To no family-featured ghost,  
Nor did any word body with a name  
The blank mood she walked in. Once past  
The dream-peopled village, her eyes entertained no dream,  
And the sandman's dust

Lost luster under her footsoles.  
The long wind, paring her person down

To a pinch of flame, blew its burdened whistle  
In the whorl of her ear, and like a scooped-out pumpkin  
crown  
Her head cupped the babel.

All the night gave her, in return  
For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat  
Of her heart was the humped indifferent iron  
Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set  
On black stone. Barns

Guarded broods and litters  
Behind shut doors; the dairy herds  
Knelt in the meadow mute as boulders;  
Sheep drowsed stoneward in their tussocks of wool, and  
birds,  
Twig-sleeping, wore

Granite ruffs, their shadows  
The guise of leaves. The whole landscape  
Loomed absolute as the antique world was  
Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,  
Unaltered by eyes,

Enough to snuff the quick  
Of her small heat out, but before the weight  
Of stones and hills of stones could break  
Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light  
She turned back.

## Faun

---

Haunched like a faun, he hooded  
From grove of moon-glint and fen-frost  
Until all owls in the twigged forest  
Flapped black to look and brood  
On the call this man made.

No sound but a drunken coot  
Lurching home along river bank.  
Stars hung water-sunk, so a rank  
Of double star-eyes lit  
Boughs where those owls sat.

An arena of yellow eyes  
Watched the changing shape he cut,  
Saw hoof harden from foot, saw sprout  
Goat-horns. Marked how god rose  
And galloped woodward in that guise.

## Departure

---

The figs on the fig tree in the yard are green;  
Green, also, the grapes on the green vine  
Shading the brickred porch tiles.  
The money's run out.

How nature, sensing this, compounds her bitters.  
Ungifted, ungrieved, our leavetaking.  
The sun shines on unripe corn.  
Cats play in the stalks.

Retrospect shall not soften such penury—  
Sun's brass, the moon's steely patinas,  
The leaden slag of the world—  
But always expose

The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay  
Against which the brunt of outer sea  
Beats, is brutal endlessly.  
Gull-fouled, a stone hut

Bares its low lintel to corroding weathers:  
Across that jut of ochreous rock  
Goats shamle, morose, rank-haired,  
To lick the sea-salt.

## The Colossus

---

I shall never get you put together entirely,  
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.  
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles  
Proceed from your great lips.  
It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.  
Thirty years now I have labored  
To dredge the silt from your throat.  
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol  
I crawl like an ant in mourning  
Over the weedy acres of your brow  
To mend the immense skull plates and clear  
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia  
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself  
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.  
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.  
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.  
It would take more than a lightning-stroke

To create such a ruin.  
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia  
Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.  
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.  
My hours are married to shadow.  
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel  
On the blank stones of the landing.

## Lorelei

---

It is no night to drown in:  
A full moon, river lapsing  
Black beneath bland mirror-sheen,

The blue water-mists dropping  
Scrim after scrim like fishnets  
Though fishermen are sleeping,

The massive castle turrets  
Doubling themselves in a glass  
All stillness. Yet these shapes float

Up toward me, troubling the face  
Of quiet. From the nadir  
They rise, their limbs ponderous

With richness, hair heavier  
Than sculpted marble. They sing  
Of a world more full and clear

Than can be. Sisters, your song  
Bears a burden too weighty  
For the whorled ear's listening

Here, in a well-steered country,  
Under a balanced ruler.



Deranging by harmony

Beyond the mundane order,  
Your voices lay siege. You lodge  
On the pitched reefs of nightmare,

Promising sure harborage;  
By day, descant from borders  
Of hebetude, from the ledge

Also of high windows. Worse  
Even than your maddening  
Song, your silence. At the source

Of your ice-hearted calling—  
Drunkenness of the great depths.  
O river, I see drifting

Deep in your flux of silver  
Those great goddesses of peace.  
Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

## Point Shirley

---

From Water-Tower Hill to the brick prison  
The shingle booms, bickering under  
The sea's collapse.  
Snowcakes break and welter. This year  
The gritted wave leaps  
The seawall and drops onto a bier  
Of quahog chips,  
Leaving a salty mash of ice to whiten

In my grandmother's sand yard. She is dead,  
Whose laundry snapped and froze here, who  
Kept house against  
What the sluttish, rutted sea could do.  
Squall waves once danced  
Ship timbers in through the cellar window;  
A thresh-tailed, lanced  
Shark littered in the geranium bed—

Such collusion of mulish elements  
She wore her broom straws to the nub.  
Twenty years out  
Of her hand, the house still hugs in each drab  
Stucco socket  
The purple egg-stones: from Great Head's knob  
To the filled-in Gut  
The sea in its cold gizzard ground those rounds.

Nobody wintering now behind  
The planked-up windows where she set  
Her wheat loaves  
And apple cakes to cool. What is it  
Survives, grieves  
So, over this battered, obstinate spit  
Of gravel? The waves'  
Spewed relics clicker masses in the wind,

Grey waves the stub-necked eiders ride.  
A labor of love, and that labor lost.  
Steadily the sea  
Eats at Point Shirley. She died blessed,  
And I come by  
Bones, bones only, pawed and tossed,  
A dog-faced sea.  
The sun sinks under Boston, bloody red.

I would get from these dry-papped stones  
The milk your love instilled in them.  
The black ducks dive.  
And though your graciousness might stream,  
And I contrive,  
Grandmother, stones are nothing of home  
To that spumiest dove.  
Against both bar and tower the black sea runs.

## The Bull of Bendylaw

---

The black bull bellowed before the sea.  
The sea, till that day orderly,  
Hove up against Bendylaw.

The queen in the mulberry arbor stared  
Stiff as a queen on a playing card.  
The king fingered his beard.

A blue sea, four horny bull-feet,  
A bull-snouted sea that wouldn't stay put,  
Bucked at the garden gate.

Along box-lined walks in the florid sun  
Toward the rowdy bellow and back again  
The lords and ladies ran.

The great bronze gate began to crack,  
The sea broke in at every crack,  
Pellmell, blueblack.

The bull surged up, the bull surged down,  
Not to be stayed by a daisy chain  
Nor by any learned man.

O the king's tidy acre is under the sea,  
And the royal rose in the bull's belly,

And the bull on the king's highway.

## All the Dead Dears

---

*In the Archæological Museum in Cambridge is a stone coffin of the fourth century A.D. containing the skeletons of a woman, a mouse and a shrew. The ankle-bone of the woman has been slightly gnawn.*

Rigged poker-stiff on her back  
With a granite grin  
This antique museum-cased lady  
Lies, companioned by the gimcrack  
Relics of a mouse and a shrew  
That battened for a day on her ankle-bone.

These three, unmasked now, bear  
Dry witness  
To the gross eating game  
We'd wink at if we didn't hear  
Stars grinding, crumb by crumb,  
Our own grist down to its bony face.

How they grip us through thin and thick,  
These barnacle dead!  
This lady here's no kin  
Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck  
Blood and whistle my marrow clean  
To prove it. As I think now of her head,

From the mercury-backed glass

Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother  
Reach hag hands to haul me in,  
And an image looms under the fishpond surface  
Where the daft father went down  
With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair—

All the long gone darlings: they  
Get back, though, soon,  
Soon: be it by wakes, weddings,  
Childbirths or a family barbecue:  
Any touch, taste, tang's  
Fit for those outlaws to ride home on,

And to sanctuary: usurping the armchair  
Between tick  
And tack of the clock, until we go,  
Each skulled-and-crossboned Gulliver  
Riddled with ghosts, to lie  
Deadlocked with them, taking root as cradles rock.

## Aftermath

---

Compelled by calamity's magnet  
They loiter and stare as if the house  
Burnt-out were theirs, or as if they thought  
Some scandal might any minute ooze  
From a smoke-choked closet into light;  
No deaths, no prodigious injuries  
Glut these hunters after an old meat,  
Blood-spoor of the austere tragedies.

Mother Medea in a green smock  
Moves humbly as any housewife through  
Her ruined apartments, taking stock  
Of charred shoes, the sodden upholstery:  
Cheated of the pyre and the rack,  
The crowd sucks her last tear and turns away.



# The Thin People

---

They are always with us, the thin people  
Meager of dimension as the grey people

On a movie-screen. They  
Are unreal, we say:

It was only in a movie, it was only  
In a war making evil headlines when we

Were small that they famished and  
Grew so lean and would not round

Out their stalky limbs again though peace  
Plumped the bellies of the mice

Under the meanest table.  
It was during the long hunger-battle

They found their talent to persevere  
In thinness, to come, later,

Into our bad dreams, their menace  
Not guns, not abuses,

But a thin silence.  
Wrapped in flea-ridden donkey skins,

Empty of complaint, forever  
Drinking vinegar from tin cups: they wore

The insufferable nimbus of the lot-drawn  
Scapegoat. But so thin,

So weedy a race could not remain in dreams,  
Could not remain outlandish victims

In the contracted country of the head  
Any more than the old woman in her mud hut could

Keep from cutting fat meat  
Out of the side of the generous moon when it

Set foot nightly in her yard  
Until her knife had pared

The moon to a rind of little light.  
Now the thin people do not obliterate

Themselves as the dawn  
Greyness blues, reddens, and the outline

Of the world comes clear and fills with color.  
They persist in the sunlit room: the wallpaper

Frieze of cabbage-roses and cornflowers pales  
Under their thin-lipped smiles,

Their withering kingship.  
How they prop each other up!

We own no wildernesses rich and deep enough

For stronghold against their stiff

Battalions. See, how the tree boles flatten  
And lose their good browns

If the thin people simply stand in the forest,  
Making the world go thin as a wasp's nest

And greyer; not even moving their bones.

## Suicide Off Egg Rock

---

Behind him the hotdogs split and drizzled  
On the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats,  
Gas tanks, factory stacks—that landscape  
Of imperfections his bowels were part of—  
Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraft.  
Sun struck the water like a damnation.  
No pit of shadow to crawl into,  
And his blood beating the old tattoo  
I am, I am, I am. Children  
Were squealing where combers broke and the spindrift  
Raveled wind-ripped from the crest of the wave.  
A mongrel working his legs to a gallop  
Hustled a gull flock to flap off the sandspit.

He smoldered, as if stone-deaf, blindfold,  
His body beached with the sea's garbage,  
A machine to breathe and beat forever.  
Flies filing in through a dead skate's eyehole  
Buzzed and assailed the vaulted brainchamber.  
The words in his book wormed off the pages.  
Everything glittered like blank paper.

Everything shrank in the sun's corrosive  
Ray but Egg Rock on the blue wastage.  
He heard when he walked into the water

The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges.

## Mushrooms

---

Overnight, very  
Whitely, discreetly,  
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses  
Take hold on the loam,  
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,  
Stops us, betrays us;  
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on  
Heaving the needles,  
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.  
Our hammers, our rams,  
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,  
Widen the crannies,  
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,  
On crumbs of shadow,

Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.

So many of us!

So many of us!

We are shelves, we are

Tables, we are meek,

We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers

In spite of ourselves.

Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning

Inherit the earth.

Our foot's in the door.

## I Want, I Want

---

Open-mouthed, the baby god  
Immense, bald, though baby-headed,  
Cried out for the mother's dug.  
The dry volcanoes cracked and spit,

Sand abraded the milkless lip.  
Cried then for the father's blood  
Who set wasp, wolf and shark to work,  
Engineered the gannet's beak.

Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch  
Raised his men of skin and bone,  
Barbs on the crown of gilded wire,  
Thorns on the bloody rose-stem.



## Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows

---

There, spring lambs jam the sheepfold. In air  
Stilled, silvered as water in a glass  
Nothing is big or far.  
The small shrew chitters from its wilderness  
Of grassheads and is heard.  
Each thumb-size bird  
Flits nimble-winged in thickets, and of good color.

Cloudrack and owl-hollowed willows slanting over  
The bland Granta double their white and green  
World under the sheer water  
And ride that flux at anchor, upside down.  
The punter sinks his pole.  
In Byron's pool  
Cattails part where the tame cygnets steer.

It is a country on a nursery plate.  
Spotted cows revolve their jaws and crop  
Red clover or gnaw beetroot  
Bellied on a nimbus of sun-glazed buttercup.  
Hedging meadows of benign  
Arcadian green  
The blood-berried hawthorn hides its spines with white.

Droll, vegetarian, the water rat  
Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove,

While the students stroll or sit,  
Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love—  
Black-gowned, but unaware  
How in such mild air  
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

## The Ghost's Leavetaking

---

Enter the chilly no-man's land of about  
Five o'clock in the morning, the no-color void  
Where the waking head rubbishes out the draggled lot  
Of sulfurous dreamscapes and obscure lunar conundrums  
Which seemed, when dreamed, to mean so profoundly much,

Gets ready to face the ready-made creation  
Of chairs and bureaus and sleep-twisted sheets.  
This is the kingdom of the fading apparition,  
The oracular ghost who dwindles on pin-legs  
To a knot of laundry, with a classic bunch of sheets

Upraised, as a hand, emblematic of farewell.  
At this joint between two worlds and two entirely  
Incompatible modes of time, the raw material  
Of our meat-and-potato thoughts assumes the nimbus  
Of ambrosial revelation. And so departs.

Chair and bureau are the hieroglyphs  
Of some godly utterance wakened heads ignore:  
So these posed sheets, before they thin to nothing,  
Speak in sign language of a lost otherworld,  
A world we lose by merely waking up.

Trailing its telltale tatters only at the outermost  
Fringe of mundane vision, this ghost goes

Hand aloft, goodbye, goodbye, not down  
Into the rocky gizzard of the earth,  
But toward a region where our thick atmosphere

Diminishes, and God knows what is there.  
A point of exclamation marks that sky  
In ringing orange like a stellar carrot.  
Its round period, displaced and green,  
Suspends beside it the first point, the starting

Point of Eden, next the new moon's curve.  
Go, ghost of our mother and father, ghost of us,  
And ghost of our dreams' children, in those sheets  
Which signify our origin and end,  
To the cloud-cuckoo land of color wheels

And pristine alphabets and cows that moo  
And moo as they jump over moons as new  
As that crisp cusp toward which you voyage now.  
Hail and farewell. Hello, goodbye. O keeper  
Of the profane grail, the dreaming skull.

## A Winter Ship

---

At this wharf there are no grand landings to speak of.  
Red and orange barges list and blister  
Shackled to the dock, outmoded, gaudy,  
And apparently indestructible.  
The sea pulses under a skin of oil.

A gull holds his pose on a shanty ridgepole,  
Riding the tide of the wind, steady  
As wood and formal, in a jacket of ashes,  
The whole flat harbor anchored in  
The round of his yellow eye-button.

A blimp swims up like a day-moon or tin  
Cigar over his rink of fishes.  
The prospect is dull as an old etching.  
They are unloading three barrels of little crabs.  
The pier pilings seem about to collapse

And with them that rickety edifice  
Of warehouses, derricks, smokestacks and bridges  
In the distance. All around us the water slips  
And gossips in its loose vernacular,  
Ferrying the smells of dead cod and tar.

Farther out, the waves will be mouthing icecakes—  
A poor month for park-sleepers and lovers.

Even our shadows are blue with cold.  
We wanted to see the sun come up  
And are met, instead, by this iceribbed ship,

Bearded and blown, an albatross of frost,  
Relic of tough weather, every winch and stay  
Encased in a glassy pellicle.

The sun will diminish it soon enough:  
Each wave-tip glitters like a knife.

## Full Fathom Five

---

Old man, you surface seldom.  
Then you come in with the tide's coming  
When seas wash cold, foam-

Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,  
A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves  
Crest and trough. Miles long

Extend the radial sheaves  
Of your spread hair, in which wrinkling skeins  
Knotted, caught, survives

The old myth of origins  
Unimaginable. You float near  
As keeled ice-mountains

Of the north, to be steered clear  
Of, not fathomed. All obscurity  
Starts with a danger:

Your dangers are many. I  
Cannot look much but your form suffers  
Some strange injury

And seems to die: so vapors  
Ravel to clearness on the dawn sea.

The muddy rumors

Of your burial move me  
To half-believe: your reappearance  
Proves rumors shallow,

For the archaic trenched lines  
Of your grained face shed time in runnels:  
Ages beat like rains

On the unbeaten channels  
Of the ocean. Such sage humor and  
Durance are whirlpools

To make away with the ground-  
Work of the earth and the sky's ridgepole.  
Waist down, you may wind

One labyrinthine tangle  
To root deep among knuckles, shin-bones,  
Skulls. Inscrutable,

Below shoulders not once  
Seen by any man who kept his head,  
You defy questions;

You defy other godhood.  
I walk dry on your kingdom's border  
Exiled to no good.

Your shelled bed I remember.  
Father, this thick air is murderous.  
I would breathe water.



## Blue Moles

---

### 1

They're out of the dark's ragbag, these two  
Moles dead in the pebbled rut,  
Shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart—  
Blue suede a dog or fox has chewed.  
One, by himself, seemed pitiable enough,  
Little victim unearthed by some large creature  
From his orbit under the elm root.  
The second carcass makes a duel of the affair:  
Blind twins bitten by bad nature.

The sky's far dome is sane and clear.  
Leaves, undoing their yellow caves  
Between the road and the lake water,  
Bare no sinister spaces. Already  
The moles look neutral as the stones.  
Their corkscrew noses, their white hands  
Uplifted, stiffen in a family pose.  
Difficult to imagine how fury struck—  
Dissolved now, smoke of an old war.

### 2

Nightly the battle-shouts start up  
In the ear of the veteran, and again  
I enter the soft pelt of the mole.  
Light's death to them: they shrivel in it.

They move through their mute rooms while I sleep,  
Palming the earth aside, grubbers  
After the fat children of root and rock.  
By day, only the topsoil heaves.  
Down there one is alone.

Outsize hands prepare a path,  
They go before: opening the veins,  
Delving for the appendages  
Of beetles, sweetbreads, shards—to be eaten  
Over and over. And still the heaven  
Of final surfeit is just as far  
From the door as ever. What happens between us  
Happens in darkness, vanishes  
Easy and often as each breath.

## Strumpet Song

---

With white frost gone  
And all green dreams not worth much,  
After a lean day's work  
Time comes round for that foul slut:  
Mere bruit of her takes our street  
Until every man,  
Red, pale or dark,  
Veers to her slouch.

Mark, I cry, that mouth  
Made to do violence on,  
That seamed face  
Askew with blotch, dint, scar  
Struck by each dour year.  
Walks there not some such one man  
As can spare breath  
To patch with brand of love this rank grimace  
Which out from black tarn, ditch and cup  
Into my most chaste own eyes  
Looks up.

## Man in Black

---

Where the three magenta  
Breakwaters take the shove  
And suck of the grey sea

To the left, and the wave  
Unfists against the dun  
Barb-wired headland of

The Deer Island prison  
With its trim piggeries,  
Hen huts and cattle green

To the right, and March ice  
Glazes the rock pools yet,  
Snuff-colored sand cliffs rise

Over a great stone spit  
Bared by each falling tide,  
And you, across those white

Stones, strode out in your dead  
Black coat, black shoes, and your  
Black hair till there you stood,

Fixed vortex on the far  
Tip, riveting stones, air,

All of it, together.

## Snakecharmer

---

As the gods began one world, and man another,  
So the snakecharmer begins a snaky sphere  
With moon-eye, mouth-pipe. He pipes. Pipes green. Pipes water.

Pipes water green until green waters waver  
With reedy lengths and necks and undulating.  
And as his notes twine green, the green river

Shapes its images around his songs.  
He pipes a place to stand on, but no rocks,  
No floor: a wave of flickering grass tongues

Supports his foot. He pipes a world of snakes,  
Of sways and coilings, from the snake-rooted bottom  
Of his mind. And now nothing but snakes

Is visible. The snake-scales have become  
Leaf, become eyelid; snake-bodies, bough, breast  
Of tree and human. And he within this snakedom

Rules the writhings which make manifest  
His snakehood and his might with pliant tunes  
From his thin pipe. Out of this green nest

As out of Eden's navel twist the lines  
Of snaky generations: let there be snakes!

And snakes there were, are, will be—till yawns

Consume this piper and he tires of music  
And pipes the world back to the simple fabric  
Of snake-warp, snake-weft. Pipes the cloth of snakes

To a melting of green waters, till no snake  
Shows its head, and those green waters back to  
Water, to green, to nothing like a snake.  
Puts up his pipe, and lids his moony eye.

## The Hermit at Outermost House

---

Sky and sea, horizon-hinged  
Tablets of blank blue, couldn't,  
Clapped shut, flatten this man out.

The great gods, Stone-Head, Claw-Foot,  
Winded by much rock-bumping  
And claw-threat, realized that.

For what, then, had they endured  
Dourly the long hots and colds,  
Those old despots, if he sat

Laugh-shaken on his doorsill,  
Backbone unbendable as  
Timbers of his upright hut?

Hard gods were there, nothing else.  
Still he thumbled out something else.  
Thumbled no stony, horny pot,

But a certain meaning green.  
He withstood them, that hermit.  
Rock-face, crab-claw verged on green.

Gulls mulled in the greenest light.



## The Disquieting Muses

---

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt  
Or what disfigured and unsightly  
Cousin did you so unwisely keep  
Unasked to my christening, that she  
Sent these ladies in her stead  
With heads like darning-eggs to nod  
And nod and nod at foot and head  
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories  
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,  
Mother, whose witches always, always  
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder  
Whether you saw them, whether you said  
Words to rid me of those three ladies  
Nodding by night around my bed,  
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve  
Study windows bellied in  
Like bubbles about to break, you fed  
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine  
And helped the two of us to choir:  
"Thor is angry: boom boom boom!"  
Thor is angry: we don't care!"  
But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,  
Blinking flashlights like fireflies  
And singing the glowworm song, I could  
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress  
But, heavy-footed, stood aside  
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed  
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:  
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons  
And praised my arabesques and trills  
Although each teacher found my touch  
Oddly wooden in spite of scales  
And the hours of practicing, my ear  
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.  
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,  
From muses unhired by you, dear mother,

I woke one day to see you, mother,  
Floating above me in bluest air  
On a green balloon bright with a million  
Flowers and bluebirds that never were  
Never, never, found anywhere.  
But the little planet bobbed away  
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!  
And I faced my traveling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,  
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,  
Faces blank as the day I was born,  
Their shadows long in the setting sun  
That never brightens or goes down.

And this is the kingdom you bore me to,  
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine  
Will betray the company I keep.

## Medallion

---

By the gate with star and moon  
Worked into the peeled orange wood  
The bronze snake lay in the sun

Inert as a shoelace; dead  
But pliable still, his jaw  
Unhinged and his grin crooked,

Tongue a rose-colored arrow.  
Over my hand I hung him.  
His little vermilion eye

Ignited with a glassed flame  
As I turned him in the light;  
When I split a rock one time

The garnet bits burned like that.  
Dust dulled his back to ocher  
The way sun ruins a trout.

Yet his belly kept its fire  
Going under the chainmail,  
The old jewels smoldering there

In each opaque belly-scale:  
Sunset looked at through milk glass.

And I saw white maggots coil

Thin as pins in the dark bruise  
Where his innards bulged as if  
He were digesting a mouse.

Knifelike, he was chaste enough,  
Pure death's-metal. The yardman's  
Flung brick perfected his laugh.

## The Companionable Ills

---

The nose-end that twitches, the old imperfections—  
Tolerable now as moles on the face  
Put up with until chagrin gives place  
To a wry complaisance—

Dug in first as God's spurs  
To start the spirit out of the mud  
It stabled in; long-used, became well-loved  
Bedfellows of the spirit's debauch, fond masters.

## Moonrise

---

Grub-white mulberries redden among leaves.  
I'll go out and sit in white like they do,  
Doing nothing. July's juice rounds their nubs.

This park is fleshed with idiot petals.  
White catalpa flowers tower, topple,  
Cast a round white shadow in their dying.

A pigeon rudders down. Its fantail's white.  
Vocation enough: opening, shutting  
White petals, white fantails, ten white fingers.

Enough for fingernails to make half-moons  
Redden in white palms no labor reddens.  
White bruises toward color, else collapses.

Berries redden. A body of whiteness  
Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone  
Though the body walk out in clean linen.

I smell that whiteness here, beneath the stones  
Where small ants roll their eggs, where grubs fatten.  
Death may whiten in sun or out of it.

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.  
I can see no color for this whiteness.

White: it is a complexion of the mind.

I tire, imagining white Niagaras  
Build up from a rock root, as fountains build  
Against the weighty image of their fall.

Lucina, bony mother, laboring  
Among the socketed white stars, your face  
Of candor pares white flesh to the white bone,

Who drag our ancient father at the heel,  
White-bearded, weary. The berries purple  
And bleed. The white stomach may ripen yet.



## Spinster

---

Now this particular girl  
During a ceremonious April walk  
With her latest suitor  
Found herself, of a sudden, intolerably struck  
By the birds' irregular babel  
And the leaves' litter.

By this tumult afflicted, she  
Observed her lover's gestures unbalance the air,  
His gait stray uneven  
Through a rank wilderness of fern and flower.  
She judged petals in disarray,  
The whole season, sloven.

How she longed for winter then!—  
Scrupulously austere in its order  
Of white and black  
Ice and rock, each sentiment within border,  
And heart's frosty discipline  
Exact as a snowflake.

But here—a burgeoning  
Unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits  
Into vulgar motley—  
A treason not to be borne. Let idiots  
Reel giddy in bedlam spring:

She withdrew neatly.

And round her house she set  
Such a barricade of barb and check  
Against mutinous weather  
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break  
With curse, fist, threat  
Or love, either.

## Frog Autumn

---

Summer grows old, cold-blooded mother.  
The insects are scant, skinny.  
In these palustral homes we only  
Croak and wither.

Mornings dissipate in somnolence.  
The sun brightens tardily  
Among the pithless reeds. Flies fail us.  
The fen sickens.

Frost drops even the spider. Clearly  
The genius of plenitude  
Houses himself elsewhere. Our folk thin  
Lamentably.

## Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor

---

I came before the water-  
Colorists came to get the  
Good of the Cape light that scours  
Sand grit to sided crystal  
And buffs and sleeks the blunt hulls  
Of the three fishing smacks beached  
On the bank of the river's

Backtracking tail. I'd come for  
Free fish-bait: the blue mussels  
Clumped like bulbs at the grass-root  
Margin of the tidal pools.  
Dawn tide stood dead low. I smelt  
Mud stench, shell guts, gulls' leavings;  
Heard a queer crusty scrabble

Cease, and I neared the silenced  
Edge of a cratered pool-bed.  
The mussels hung dull blue and  
Conspicuous, yet it seemed  
A sly world's hinges had swung  
Shut against me. All held still.  
Though I counted scant seconds,

Enough ages lapsed to win  
Confidence of safe-conduct

In the wary otherworld  
Eyeing me. Grass put forth claws;  
Small mud knobs, nudged from under,  
Displaced their domes as tiny  
Knights might doff their casques. The crabs

Inched from their pygmy burrows  
And from the trench-dug mud, all  
Camouflaged in mottled mail  
Of browns and greens. Each wore one  
Claw swollen to a shield large  
As itself—no fiddler's arm  
Grown Gargantuan by trade,

But grown grimly, and grimly  
Borne, for a use beyond my  
Guessing of it. Sibilant  
Mass-motivated hordes, they sidled  
Out in a converging stream  
Toward the pool-mouth, perhaps to  
Meet the thin and sluggish thread

Of sea retracing its tide-  
Way up the river-basin.  
Or to avoid me. They moved  
Obliquely with a dry-wet  
Sound, with a glittery wisp  
And trickle. Could they feel mud  
Pleasurable under claws

As I could between bare toes?  
That question ended it—I  
Stood shut out, for once, for all,

Puzzling the passage of their  
Absolutely alien  
Order as I might puzzle  
At the clear tail of Halley's

Comet coolly giving my  
Orbit the go-by, made known  
By a family name it  
Knew nothing of. So the crabs  
Went about their business, which  
Wasn't fiddling, and I filled  
A big handkerchief with blue

Mussels. From what the crabs saw,  
If they could see, I was one  
Two-legged mussel-picker.  
High on the airy thatching  
Of the dense grasses I found  
The husk of a fiddler-crab,  
Intact, strangely strayed above

His world of mud—green color  
And innards bleached and blown off  
Somewhere by much sun and wind;  
There was no telling if he'd  
Died recluse or suicide  
Or headstrong Columbus crab.  
The crab-face, etched and set there,

Grimaced as skulls grimace: it  
Had an Oriental look,  
A samurai death mask done  
On a tiger tooth, less for

Art's sake than God's. Far from sea—  
Where red-freckled crab-backs, claws  
And whole crabs, dead, their soggy

Bellies pallid and upturned,  
Perform their shambling waltzes  
On the waves' dissolving turn  
And return, losing themselves  
Bit by bit to their friendly  
Element—this relic saved  
Face, to face the bald-faced sun.

## The Beekeeper's Daughter

---

A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet-speckled, black  
The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks.  
Their musk encroaches, circle after circle,  
A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in.  
Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,  
You move among the many-breasted hives,

My heart under your foot, sister of a stone.

Trumpet-throats open to the beaks of birds.  
The Golden Rain Tree drips its powders down.  
In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red  
The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings  
To father dynasties. The air is rich.  
Here is a queenship no mother can contest—

A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings.

In burrows narrow as a finger, solitary bees  
Keep house among the grasses. Kneeling down  
I set my eye to a hole-mouth and meet an eye  
Round, green, disconsolate as a tear.  
Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg  
Under the coronal of sugar roses

The queen bee marries the winter of your year.



## The Times Are Tidy

---

Unlucky the hero born  
In this province of the stuck record  
Where the most watchful cooks go jobless  
And the mayor's rôtisserie turns  
Round of its own accord.

There's no career in the venture  
Of riding against the lizard,  
Himself withered these latter-days  
To leaf-size from lack of action:  
History's beaten the hazard.

The last crone got burnt up  
More than eight decades back  
With the love-hot herb, the talking cat,  
But the children are better for it,  
The cow milk's cream an inch thick.

## The Burnt-out Spa

---

An old beast ended in this place:

A monster of wood and rusty teeth.  
Fire smelted his eyes to lumps  
Of pale blue vitreous stuff, opaque  
As resin drops oozed from pine bark.

The rafters and struts of his body wear  
Their char of karakul still. I can't tell  
How long his carcass has foundered under  
The rubbish of summers, the black-leaved falls.

Now little weeds insinuate  
Soft suede tongues between his bones.  
His armorplate, his toppled stones  
Are an esplanade for crickets.

I pick and pry like a doctor or  
Archæologist among  
Iron entrails, enamel bowls,  
The coils and pipes that made him run.

The small dell eats what ate it once.  
And yet the ichor of the spring  
Proceeds clear as it ever did  
From the broken throat, the marshy lip.

It flows off below the green and white  
Balustrade of a sag-backed bridge.  
Leaning over, I encounter one  
Blue and improbable person

Framed in a basketwork of cattails.  
O she is gracious and austere,  
Seated beneath the toneless water!  
It is not I, it is not I.

No animal spoils on her green door-step.  
And we shall never enter there  
Where the durable ones keep house.  
The stream that hustles us

Neither nourishes nor heals.

# Sculptor

---

FOR LEONARD BASKIN

To his house the bodiless  
Come to barter endlessly  
Vision, wisdom, for bodies  
Palpable as his, and weighty.

Hands moving move priestlier  
Than priest's hands, invoke no vain  
Images of light and air  
But sure stations in bronze, wood, stone.

Obdurate, in dense-grained wood,  
A bald angel blocks and shapes  
The flimsy light; arms folded  
Watches his cumbrous world eclipse

Inane worlds of wind and cloud.  
Bronze dead dominate the floor,  
Resistive, ruddy-bodied,  
Dwarfing us. Our bodies flicker

Toward extinction in those eyes  
Which, without him, were beggared  
Of place, time, and their bodies.  
Emulous spirits make discord,

Try entry, enter nightmares  
Until his chisel bequeaths  
Them life livelier than ours,  
A solider repose than death's.

## Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond

---

Now coldness comes sifting down, layer after layer,  
To our bower at the lily root.  
Overhead the old umbrellas of summer  
Wither like pithless hands. There is little shelter.

Hourly the eye of the sky enlarges its blank  
Dominion. The stars are no nearer.  
Already frog-mouth and fish-mouth drink  
The liquor of indolence, and all things sink

Into a soft caul of forgetfulness.  
The fugitive colors die.  
Caddis worms drowse in their silk cases,  
The lamp-headed nymphs are nodding to sleep like statues.

Puppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-master,  
Wear masks of horn to bed.  
This is not death, it is something safer.  
The wingy myths won't tug at us any more:

The molts are tongueless that sang from above the water  
Of golgotha at the tip of a reed,  
And how a god flimsy as a baby's finger  
Shall unhusk himself and steer into the air.

## The Stones

---

This is the city where men are mended.

I lie on a great anvil.

The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll

When I fell out of the light. I entered

The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.

The mother of pestles diminished me.

I became a still pebble.

The stones of the belly were peaceable,

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.

Only the mouth-hole piped out,

Importunate cricket

In a quarry of silences.

The people of the city heard it.

They hunted the stones, taciturn and separate,

The mouth-hole crying their locations.

Drunk as a fetus

I suck at the paps of darkness.

The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away.

The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry

Open one stone eye.

This is the after-hell: I see the light.

A wind unstoppers the chamber

Of the ear, old worrier.

Water mollifies the flint lip,

And daylight lays its sameness on the wall.

The grafters are cheerful,

Heating the pincers, hoisting the delicate hammers.

A current agitates the wires

Volt upon volt. Catgut stitches my fissures.

A workman walks by carrying a pink torso.

The storerooms are full of hearts.

This is the city of spare parts.

My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.

Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.

On Fridays the little children come

To trade their hooks for hands.

Dead men leave eyes for others.

Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.

The vase, reconstructed, houses

The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.

My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.

I shall be good as new.